

Assessing the AmeriCorps Projects of Public Housing Authorities

Best Practices and Lessons Learned

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1. Introduction

1.1 Purpose and Organization of the Report

In the early 1990s, the enacting of key national service legislation expanded opportunities for individuals to serve their communities and support the work of public and non-profit organizations around the country. Most notably, the National and Community Service Trust Act of 1993 created AmeriCorps and a new federal agency, the Corporation for National and Community Service (CNCS), which administers all federal funding for national service programs. The act brought together under AmeriCorps the longstanding Volunteers in Service to America (VISTA) and National Civilian Community Corps (NCCC), as well as the newly established AmeriCorps State and National programs.

Since 1991, and perhaps even earlier, public housing authorities (PHAs) and their assisted communities have benefited from national service grants and the work of program participants. The efforts and dedication of AmeriCorps State, AmeriCorps VISTA and other service corps members have enabled the strengthening of PHA services and the development of innovative projects for low-income communities across the U.S. At the same time, through their work with PHAs, thousands of AmeriCorps members have gained confidence, job skills, work experience, and increased motivation to continue serving their communities.

With recent legislation supporting the continued growth of national service programs, opportunities for PHAs to develop and expand AmeriCorps projects arguably have never been better. As the result of the Edward M. Kennedy Serve America Act being signed by President Obama on April 21, 2009, CNCS projects that the annual number of AmeriCorps members sponsored will increase from 75,000 to 250,000 by 2017. In addition, the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act of 2009 has allocated \$201 million for CNCS to put an estimated 13,000 additional AmeriCorps members to work immediately.¹

This report aims to provide guidance for the expansion and improvement of AmeriCorps projects sponsored by PHAs, based upon the best practices and lessons learned of PHAs with AmeriCorps experience.

1.2 National Service in a Nutshell

CNCS administers grants through three primary program tracks: Senior Corps, Learn and Serve America, and AmeriCorps. The programs within each track all aim to engage Americans in serving their communities, but the objectives and administrative processes of each program type differ significantly. Senior Corps programs seek to draw on the skills and experiences of retired adults, while Learn and Serve America programs focus on developing service-learning opportunities for students of all ages. AmeriCorps programs are more general, providing the means for public and non-profit organizations to strengthen their capacities through assistance and expertise provided by service corps members.

Research for this report has revealed that of the three program tracks, PHAs receive grants from CNCS primarily for AmeriCorps State and AmeriCorps VISTA projects. At a local level, AmeriCorps State grants are administered by governor-appointed State Service Commissions, while AmeriCorps VISTA grants are administered through CNCS State Offices. For both types of grants, PHAs may receive funding through the intermediary organizations that exist in many states. Intermediaries provide support to smaller organizations in the sponsoring of AmeriCorps members.

1.3 Key Findings

Through twenty-four phone interviews conducted with PHAs, grant administrators, and AmeriCorps

¹ For more information about CNCS programs and funding opportunities, visit the agency's website at www.nationalservice.gov

members, this study revealed the following regarding the AmeriCorps projects of PHAs:

- The PHAs interviewed sponsor an average of 9.6 AmeriCorps State and VISTA members per year.
- At least thirty percent of the members sponsored by eight out of ten PHAs are public housing residents.
- The initial steps of project planning and member recruitment are time-consuming but critically important to the long-term success of an AmeriCorps project.
- For projects that bring on residents to serve as members, PHA staff should look for and recommend residents that stand out as dedicated leaders of their communities.
- Three PHAs with AmeriCorps State projects have found that direct service activities for adults are more effectively carried out by non-resident members.
- Although requiring more time and personal investment by project managers, PHAs that bring on residents to serve as members have found that AmeriCorps serves as an excellent confidence-building job-training project that does not affect rent payments.
- Medium to large AmeriCorps projects require full-time managers, due to administrative requirements and the degree of member support needed to ensure a project's success.
- Small PHAs concerned about the time and effort required to sponsor an AmeriCorps project should consider partnering as sub-grantees of an intermediary organization.
- When applying for a grant and identifying activities for implementation, PHAs must take into consideration four factors: 1) the requirements of the grant project to which they are applying, 2) the types of members they expect to be able to recruit, 3) the needs of the communities they serve, and 4) the capacity of their organization to effectively oversee the activities' implementation.
- Indicators of a successful PHA AmeriCorps project include the following: 1) a high retention rate, 2) the sustainability of projects post-AmeriCorps, and 3) the extent to which AmeriCorps prepares members for employment and long-term commitment to serving their communities.

2. Overview of research

2.1 Methodology

A primarily qualitative approach to studying PHA AmeriCorps projects was utilized, due to quantitative survey limitations and a desire to capture nuanced project differences through open-ended, informal interviews. In order to understand what constitutes a successful approach from different angles and perspectives, interviews were conducted at the levels of PHA, AmeriCorps member and grant administrator. Additional demographic data provided by the CNCS Department of Research and Policy Development will help to fill in the gaps and paint a more detailed picture of the types of individuals serving PHA communities as AmeriCorps members.

Based upon responses received from a preliminary questionnaire emailed to PHAs, HUD identified a sample of eleven PHAs with at least five years of experience implementing AmeriCorps projects. For ten of the PHAs, informal phone interviews were conducted with PHA staff responsible for the management of AmeriCorps activities and related administrative tasks. Other phone interviews were conducted as follows: six interviews with current AmeriCorps members, four with staff of CNCS state offices, two with the staff of AmeriCorps State Commissions, and two with staff from intermediary organizations (those providing AmeriCorps State or VISTA funding to PHAs, rather than PHAs receiving funds

Table 1: Overview of Projects Studied

PHA	Type of Program	Years	Number of members	Types of members	Types of activities
Burlington Housing Authority, NC	VISTA	1992 - present	15 at a time, plus 5 summer VISTAs, about 150 total.	Very diverse, of all ages. About 4-5 residents participate at a time, around 40 total.	Community building, leadership building for resident councils, fundraising and youth project development.
Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority, OH	VISTA	1994 - present	8 at a time, about 120 total.	All women residents.	Instructors for the HIPPY project (Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youth).
Duluth Housing and Redevelopment Authority, MN	State (through intermediary, True North AmeriCorps)	2003 - present	2 at a time, about 12 total.	Mostly recent college graduates. About 5 residents have participated.	Members work for the Copland Community Center, a non-profit that serves one of the housing authority's HOPE VI developments. The activities always involve working for the afterschool and summer projects.
King County Housing Authority, WA	State and some VISTA in the past (through intermediary Washington State Service Corps)	1997 - present	12 at a time, before nearly 50 at a time. About 200 total.	Most are aged 20 to 26, some seniors. At least 2 years of college required. 6 residents have participated.	Afterschool programs, community building, environmental education, food bank support, volunteer supervision, development of community gardens, ESL classes.
Kingsport Housing and Redevelopment Authority, WA	VISTA and State (through intermediary, Tennessee Community Assistance Corporation)	1992 - present	6-8 at a time, about 35 total. Includes summer VISTAs.	Average age 33 to 55. Around 25 have been residents. Summer VISTAs are mostly college students.	Strengthening resident associations, community building, organizing volunteers, developing on-site resource centers and libraries, fundraising, organizing health fairs, developing youth and senior programs.
Mercer County Housing Authority, PA	State (through intermediary, Keystone Smiles)	1997 - present	6-10 at a time, 96 total.	All ages. Around 60 have been residents, many of whom are single parents.	Early childhood education, construction, job skills training programs.
Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, WI	National (education awards provided through the Corps Network)	1991 - present	Average of 100 per year, around 1600 total.	Young adults aged 18 to 23. All participants are Section 3 eligible (from low-income families in public housing or other housing nearby).	The Milwaukee Community Service Corps administers the project for the youth of families receiving housing assistance. Project provides work experience and job training in construction, as well as AmeriCorps education awards upon project completion.
Minneapolis Housing Authority, MN	VISTA	1995 - present	5-8 at a time, about 35 total.	All ages. All members are public housing residents or Section 8 voucher holders.	Coordination of resource room and the distribution of housing information, relationship building among resident councils and outside service providers, organization and strengthening of resident councils for the implementation of activities
Reno Housing Authority, NV	VISTA	1996 - 2002	5 at a time, around 25 total.	All ages. All members were public housing residents or Section 8 voucher holders.	Recruitment and marketing for Family Self Sufficiency program, fundraising for resident councils, strengthening of relationships with service providers, youth program development
Tacoma Housing Authority, WA	State and some VISTA in the past (through intermediary Washington State Service Corps)	2002 - present	12 at a time, previously just individual members. Around 38 total.	All ages. Had 2 residents serve in 2006.	Community outreach, volunteer management, disaster preparedness, income tax assistance, job search assistance, computer skills, ESL and basic adult education, financial literacy and homeownership classes
Tulsa Housing Authority, OK	State	1998 - present	18 at a time, over 175 total.	Mostly young adults. Around 80 residents total.	Lifeskills programming for adult residents (parenting, budgeting, health/hygiene), disaster preparedness, programming for youth and seniors

directly). For the names of the individuals interviewed, see Appendix A.

Each of the sample PHAs have structured their AmeriCorps projects very differently, and the types of members serving each project varies widely. Table 1 on page 5 illustrates the projects' diversity by providing an overview of each PHA's specific approach. Due to the distinct character of the project run by the Milwaukee Community Service Corps (MCSC) (affiliated with the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee), a shorter and more specific questionnaire was answered through email by the MCSC director. Information about the MCSC project will not be included in the general observations made about AmeriCorps projects below, but an overview of the MCSC project is provided in Section 3.2.2.

2.2 Project and Member Characteristics

Most projects studied have been running for at least ten years, with two that started in the last seven years. Although numerous funding streams are administered by CNCS, the sample PHAs have secured only direct or indirect grants from AmeriCorps State and VISTA. Four PHAs receive only direct VISTA funding, one receives direct AmeriCorps State funding, four are funded through intermediary organizations that receive State funding, and one is funded through an intermediary that receives both State and VISTA grants. Two projects also currently receive funding for summer VISTAs.

The number of AmeriCorps members sponsored per year by sample PHAs ranges from two to eighteen, with a mean of 9.6 and median of 8.25. The types of individuals serving as AmeriCorps members varies just as widely: three PHAs have one-hundred percent residents or voucher holders that serve as AmeriCorps members, two PHAs have sixty to seventy percent residents, two PHAs have around thirty to forty percent residents, and two have only a few residents that have served as members (less than ten percent). A number of PHAs emphasize the benefits of having a diverse AmeriCorps team and bringing on members with a wide range of skills, ages, work and life experiences. Other PHAs have primarily young adults that serve as volunteers, particularly those in the summer VISTA projects, and one PHA brings on only women members.

3. Getting Started

3.1 Project Structure

As discussed in Section 1.2, various types of national service grants are offered by CNCS, but research for this study revealed PHAs receiving mainly AmeriCorps State and AmeriCorps VISTA grants. In addition, the residents of one PHA, the Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee, were found to benefit from a third type of AmeriCorps program, the Education Award Program (EAP). The sub-sections below will describe the types of grants and compare PHA experiences with each type. Because State, VISTA, and EAP grants differ significantly, one type might be more appropriate than the other for the needs of a given PHA.

3.1.1 State or VISTA?

The primary difference between State and VISTA involves each project's focus and intended outcomes. State grants are more general in scope, calling for members to assist non-profit organizations, schools, and other entities in providing services to communities. VISTA, on the other hand, has four core principles: anti-poverty, community empowerment, capacity building, and sustainable solutions. VISTA members do not provide direct service, but rather work with organizations to find sustainable ways to bring individuals and communities out of poverty.

CNCS staff reported that this distinction often is the primary impediment for organizations seeking VISTA funding. When describing the roles and responsibilities of potential VISTAs, applicants often

focus too heavily on activities that support the organization's current projects, rather than on the development of capacity-building strategies and new ways to address community problems. Sidney Campbell from the Minneapolis CNCS office noted that her office makes an effort to "work with applicants to see if we can help them make it more applicable to VISTA, but sometimes it just doesn't work."

Sponsoring VISTA members is a great way for PHAs to bring on creative, energetic individuals that can help agencies expand services and apply new ideas to existing projects. Sponsoring AmeriCorps State members, on the other hand, is helpful for agencies that are more in need of assistance with direct service activities and less

interested in expansion and innovation. Both types of activities benefit members as opportunities to develop job skills, work experience, and leadership capabilities. Although being more of a byproduct of AmeriCorps projects, rather than a key focus, the job skills and experience gained through AmeriCorps are particularly valuable for residents that serve as members, as is further discussed in Section 3.4.

Table 2 outlines the other core differences between the two programs. One notable distinction involves the amount of time an organization can receive funding for the sponsoring of AmeriCorps members. State grants do not have a limited timeframe for funding, as long as projects are meeting the State's criteria for grantees. VISTA projects, on the other hand, are aimed at building an organization's capacity to the extent that the funding is no longer needed. Therefore, VISTA funding is not intended to last longer

than three years. Exceptions on the time limit have been made for many of the PHAs receiving VISTA funding, due to their abilities to leverage the grants with matching funds. Of the public housing

Table 2: AmeriCorps Program Comparison

	State	VISTA
Focus	Assisting organizations in serving local communities	Building the capacities of organizations to develop sustainable means for bringing communities out of poverty
Activities	Working directly with community members, such as through tutoring, construction, administering trainings, etc.	Developing the long-term financial resources and human capital for organizations to carry out new activities, such as through fundraising, community organizing, volunteer recruitment, etc.
Cost-share	Generally required, amount depends on the State and the type of award.	Not required, although encouraged if organization applies for funding for more than 3 years
Time limits	None, but cost-share requirements may increase over time.	3 years, more if cost share is provided
Outside activities of members	No restrictions. AmeriCorps State members can work both full-time and part-time.	Members cannot have second jobs nor take more than 3 credit hours of classes. VISTAs generally work full-time.
Benefits and services covered	Depends on the state. Can be more or less than VISTA due to differences in a state's budget priorities.	Benefits and services include: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$4,725 education award or \$1,200 post-service stipend. • Health coverage for all members assigned to your project - approximately \$2,700 per member. • Payroll services: Members receive their paychecks directly from AmeriCorps VISTA. • Training in project management and leadership for members and project supervisor. • Travel costs associated with training. Moving allowance for members relocating to serve. • Childcare for income-eligible members.

authorities providing matching funds, the amount leveraged per AmeriCorps member ranged from \$500 to \$4000.

Other differences in the grants involve requirements regarding members holding second jobs or going to school, as well as the types of member benefits and services offered. The VISTA program is unique in its organization of annual member conferences held at a regional level. Of the three VISTA members interviewed, all described these events as being great experiences. Patricia Fields, a resident VISTA at the Minneapolis Public Housing Authority, describes how she looks forward to the annual conference every year:

[It's] an opportunity to come together for networking... I met a lady at a previous conference, she's a baby boomer like me, and she was able to use her VISTA scholarship and go to school. You come away informed about what's going on in the world and society... how VISTAs are helping and serving people and making life better.

Most of the members interviewed, both VISTA and State, reported that adapting to living on a modest stipend proved to be less difficult than they initially thought. Even though State allowed members to hold a second job, none of the three State members interviewed had considered finding additional employment. One resident, a VISTA member, reported that she would not be able to participate in AmeriCorps if she did not live in public housing. Of the 4 resident members interviewed, none had held steady jobs at the time they applied for AmeriCorps positions, and all expressed how thankful they were to receive the stipend. An added incentive for resident participation is that the monthly earnings of both State and VISTA members do not have an impact on the amount of rent paid by public housing residents.

3.1.2 MCSC and the Educational Award Program

Since 1991, The Housing Authority of the City of Milwaukee (HACM) has partnered with the Milwaukee Community Service Corps (MCSC) in providing training and work experience for young adults in low-income communities. As described during a phone interview with MCSC director, Chris Litzau, the housing authority "has the facilities and work that needs to be done, and we recruit the young adult population to get the work done."

Litzau reported that around twenty-five percent of participants are public housing residents, and the other seventy-five percent are members of Section 3 eligible families that live in communities surrounding MSCS developments. For an average time period of six months, the young adults gain vocational skills through hands-on experience in constructing new homes and renovating existing housing. Participants receive daily wages from construction companies or the housing authority, and at the end of their service, they are provided an AmeriCorps education award to use towards college or further vocational training.

The approach of HACM and MCSC is worth considering for PHAs that have Service and Conservation Corps (SCC) in their areas.² As noted by Litzau, reporting and administrative requirements are minimal. MCSC applies for the funds through a national organization, the Corps Network, which advocates and provides national representation for SCCs around the country. MCSC is required to recruit and run background checks on participants, as well as track and report hours on the Corps Network's online database.

Therefore, a partnership with an SCC would be an effective way for PHAs to engage low-income youth in full-time community service and job training, with AmeriCorps education awards provided upon the youths' completion of the project. PHAs might also consider promoting the AmeriCorps Education Award Program (EAP) among other partner organizations that are contracted to provide job training programs or fulfill Section 3 requirements. Furthermore, for those PHAs concerned about the time and

² See a list of corps at

http://www.corpsnetwork.org/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=81&Itemid=61

effort required to manage a full AmeriCorps project, the EAP is a feasible alternative. Funding through the EAP consists only of education awards for project participants, and the sponsoring organizations receive a small administrative grant of up to \$600 per participant per year. PHAs or interested partner organizations should contact their state commissions for applications and more information.³

3.2 Project Development

Interviewees emphasized that the development of a successful AmeriCorps project depends on the degree to which goal setting and planning activities are carried out prior to submitting a grant application. As noted by Sidney Campbell at the CNCS office in Minnesota, many organizations applying for funding “haven’t fully researched their project and what they want to accomplish; sometimes their goals are too big, and it doesn’t work out.” JoAnn Ellers of the Reno Housing Authority emphasized the need to “really think through the project and not throw together the application. [Project managers] have to think, what do I want the end result to be? What do we want to get out of this?”

The first step for PHAs in planning an AmeriCorps project must involve researching the different types of AmeriCorps programs, in order to decide which program be the best fit for their agency. PHAs should first check out online information regarding the programs at www.nationalservice.gov and www.americorps.gov. Agencies should then contact the local CNCS State Office regarding VISTA sponsorship⁴ and/or their State Service Commission to sponsor AmeriCorps State members.⁵ States and territories without State Service Commissions (South Dakota, Puerto Rico, the U.S. Virgin Islands, and the Marianas Islands) should contact their local CNCS office to apply for AmeriCorps State grants. Contacting the appropriate office enables potential sponsors to discuss ideas, receive applications, and learn about deadlines and other program information.

After gaining a better understanding of the different types of programs, CNCS recommends carrying out a community needs assessment, through which PHAs learn about the issues and concerns within housing developments and surrounding communities that AmeriCorps members would help to address. Surveys and community meetings help to increase the buy-in and awareness of families regarding AmeriCorps projects, as well as help the PHA to determine what type of project would best serve the community. As stressed by Betty Platt of the CNCS North Carolina office, good planning should involve integrating the organization’s and community’s vision for the project with the broader goals and requirements of the specific AmeriCorps grant program.

PHAs then can begin making plans, setting goals, and writing the grant proposal. During the planning and goal-setting process, project managers should apply findings from the community needs assessment, as well as gain input and feedback from both staff and community members. A project thrown together haphazardly can result in minimal positive outcomes for the community. Furthermore, a poorly-planned project can yield unsatisfactory experiences for AmeriCorps members, which then may decrease member retention rate. The commitment and understanding of key stakeholders from the very beginning ensures that AmeriCorps members have the foundation to work to the fullest of their abilities and gain as much as they can from their experience.

As discussed in Section 4.3, a PHA’s rate of members completing the project is one of the primary indicators of project success measured by CNCS. Therefore, losing members mid-year could put at risk a PHA’s ability to secure AmeriCorps funding in the future. The AmeriCorps positions offered should be well-planned and specific, corresponding with project goals and expected outcomes and giving members

³ A directory of State Service Commissions can be found at <http://www.americorps.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp>

⁴ A directory of Corporation State Offices can be found at <http://www.americorps.gov/about/contact/stateoffices.asp>

⁵ As referenced above, a directory of State Service Commissions can be found at <http://www.americorps.gov/about/contact/statecommission.asp>

a concrete framework in which to work.

Also critical to a project's success is having a project manager that effectively ensures members are happy with their work and project goals are being fulfilled. The specific responsibilities of project managers and site-level supervisors should also be well planned and understood prior to bringing on AmeriCorps members. PHAs and grant administrators all acknowledged the challenges and intensity of AmeriCorps project management, which for medium to large projects (more than eight to ten members at a time) requires a fulltime staff member. As described by Evelyn LaRue of the Minneapolis Housing Authority, "it's like running a temporary employment agency."

Additional resources to assist with project development, grant applications, and project management can be found on the AmeriCorps website at http://www.americorps.gov/for_organizations/tta/index.asp. Recommended documents include a project start-up guide developed by CNCS, *Building a High Quality AmeriCorps Program - From Blueprint to Implementation*: <http://nationalserviceresources.org/ac-startup>. In addition, the FY 2009 VISTA program guidance includes recommendations applicable for both AmeriCorps State and AmeriCorps VISTA projects: http://www.americorps.gov/pdf/2009_VISTA_PG.pdf.

3.3 Recruitment and Member Applications

CNCS and grant administrators stress both the importance and difficulty of carrying out effective recruitment strategies for AmeriCorps positions. PHAs should aim to recruit individuals that not only can work hard and make significant contributions, but also those that would truly benefit from the experience and are passionate about the work. As discussed in Section 2.2, some PHAs have also stressed the value of bringing on members of different ages and socioeconomic backgrounds, providing different skill sets and a unique opportunity for participants to learn from each other's diverse perspectives.

The AmeriCorps website serves as a primary tool for the recruitment of members, particularly those PHAs with mainly young adults serving as members. Having an appealing position description that gives a thorough overview of responsibilities is key to attracting high numbers of competitive applicants online. PHAs focusing on the recruitment of residents and members of the local community rely primarily on word-of-mouth and local publicity (flyers, notices in newsletters, etc). A few PHAs issue press releases, recruit at college fairs and post notices on the bulletin boards of local schools.

A number of PHAs mentioned unique approaches specifically to the recruitment of residents for AmeriCorps positions. Pat Porter, the AmeriCorps project manager for the King County Housing Authority, described "planting seeds for future members" by discussing AmeriCorps with over two hundred youth at an on-site Boys and Girls Club. Edna Potts in Kingsport finds success in recruiting by asking PHA staff and current/former VISTAs to keep an eye out for residents and members of the community that stand out as having the potential to serve. She does her own background checks, talking to people in the applicants' neighborhoods, before sending the applications to TCAC for official background checks. With residents, she makes sure to select individuals that are ready to give back to their community, not those that are interested in just having a job and getting paid.

The number of applications received by PHAs per position ranges from around two to fifteen. The Kingsport, Tacoma and Reno housing authorities report the highest rate of applications at more than nine per position. Tulsa reports the greatest total number received at forty-three applications for their project's eighteen AmeriCorps positions. Some PHAs accept applications at the same time every year, while others review applications on a rolling basis.

In 2008, CNCS began requiring all AmeriCorps applications to be filled out online. The PHAs bringing on residents to serve as members reported that many residents needed assistance in completing the online applications. Evelyn LaRue, who manages a resident-only AmeriCorps project for the Minneapolis

Housing Authority, attributes a significant decrease in 2008 applications to the new online application requirements. She recommends distributing instructions to assist members with the online application process. Of the members interviewed, four out of six reported filling their applications online. Only one member, a PHA resident, mentioned some difficulties with the online application: “it was very straightforward... but I’m still learning on the computer.”

When reviewing applications and interviewing, project managers should take into consideration the degree to which individuals can work effectively with other AmeriCorps members. As described by Sheryl Baker of the Washington State Service Corps, the recruitment and interviewing processes takes a couple of years to “get it right. At times, one bad apple spoils the bunch.” Because AmeriCorps members often work and/or live closely together as teams, collective group dynamics and motivation can be easily influenced by the attitudes and behaviors of one or two members.

JoAnn Ellers of the Reno Housing Authority managed a resident and voucher-holder VISTA project that ended in 2002. She described carrying out 2 rounds of interviews:

During the first interview, we were looking not necessarily for technical skills and knowledge, but for the right attitude and levels of commitment, initiative and dependability. We made sure they were in good standing with their lease, if they believed in being a team player.... Then, during the second interview, we had specific questions regarding interests and skills, just to find out more about their background and what was driving them to be in the project.

Overall, due to only a modest stipend being provided for AmeriCorps members, the final selection of members can be somewhat of a gamble, particularly when managers are looking to bring on members with certain skill sets. As noted by Catherine Smith, the manager of the Burlington Housing Authority’s AmeriCorps projects, members “with higher skills will be hungry to do more,” if their AmeriCorps experiences are not challenging and fulfilling. In addition, members might see their AmeriCorps positions as temporary jobs to hold them over until they can find higher-paid, regular positions elsewhere. Particularly in small towns and areas where unemployment rates are high, organizations run the risk of lower retention rates when bringing on members with advanced skills and education levels.

3.4 Residents as Members

Most interviewees agreed that bringing on residents as AmeriCorps members is an approach that can uniquely benefit all involved: the housing community, the residents themselves, as well as the PHA and State Commission or CNCS office. Key to the success of such an approach is ensuring the residents’ understanding that serving as AmeriCorps members is the equivalent in many ways to working as professional, full-time employees of the PHA. A few PHA staff members felt, however, that the challenges of such an approach outweigh the benefits, and therefore they no longer recruit residents for AmeriCorps positions. The following section outlines benefits, challenges and recommended approaches to having residents serve as members.

Public housing communities benefit significantly from residents working as AmeriCorps members, largely due to the resident member’s commitment to and understanding of their own community, as well as their ability to serve as a liaison between service providers, PHA staff, and community members. As Catherine Smith of Burlington described, “residents are all high energy and can understand the community, they don’t look down. They say, I’m here to help myself and to help you.” One State member, a non-resident, reported problems in communicating with low-income families that a resident member may not have had: “It’s hard to communicate with people and get them to participate, to figure out what events people want to attend.”

In order to facilitate such contributions by resident members, PHAs stressed the need to include them in staff meetings. Regular attendance at meetings keeps resident members informed about issues such as changes in rent, increased utility payments, or maintenance concerns, and enables them to explain and

translate such issues to other residents in a way that is easily understood. As such, the resident members often bridge gaps in communication between other residents and PHAs during times that may be prone to misunderstandings, such as during a HOPE VI relocation process of the Kingsport Housing and Redevelopment Authority. Member residents clarified for residents why the demolition was taking place and helped the “riled up residents to get calmed down.”

The residents themselves are also primary beneficiaries of their service as AmeriCorps members. Giving member residents opportunities to participate in staff meetings, represent their community, and work on an equal level as other PHA staff raises their confidence and self-esteem. In addition, resident members gain work experience and job skills, both important biproducts of serving their communities through AmeriCorps.

Finally, bringing on residents as members is an approach that has indirect benefits for both PHAs and AmeriCorps offices. For PHAs, Evelyn LaRue of the Minneapolis Housing Authority notes that offering positions to residents is one more way to meet their “mission to work with the community... and demonstrate commitment to residents.” For AmeriCorps offices, a primary advantage of such an approach is that when CNCS or a state commission gives a quota of members to be recruited within a short time period, PHAs can be counted on to find new members without a problem. As one administrator noted, “if I tell them you need ten people ready by July, they’ll do it.” Most PHAs that recruit members from their own communities have a list of residents identified for consideration as future possible candidates.

For some PHAs, however, the challenges of bringing residents on as members have reversed the PHAs’ initial openness to the approach. One challenge involves the difficulty faced by supervisors in establishing professional boundaries and standards in their relationships with resident members. Sheryl Baker from the Washington State Service Corps warns that supervising residents will take more time and effort than supervising other members, for in many cases, the project manager will feel the need to “help [resident members] turn their life around.” JoAnn Ellers of the Reno Housing Authority described how often when working with resident members, “it’s like you’re wearing two hats. The residents were my clients, but as VISTAs, also my coworkers.”

PHA staff gave recommendations for preventing such complications. Sheryl Baker suggests that PHAs ask themselves before taking an individual resident for an AmeriCorps position, “Are these members clients? Or are they here to serve?” JoAnn Ellers recommended that AmeriCorps supervisors clarify with resident members that “when you are in our office, you are working.” Ellers made sure that resident members found time during breaks and their lunch hours to discuss with PHA staff any issues and concerns regarding their tenancy in public housing.

Other challenges involve the boundaries needing to be established between resident members and other residents in the community, coupled with related ethical issues. The Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority reported that resident members serving in the communities in which they live often made it “difficult for members to stay focused on the AmeriCorps component.” Both the Tulsa and Kingsport PHAs emphasized the importance of resident members not serving their own developments, as conflict-of-interest issues and accusations of “working undercover” may arise among their neighbors. PHAs also discussed the need to ensure that member residents were not giving preference to family members when offering opportunities for other residents to participate in various activities.

A final challenge identified by PHAs involves the difficulties faced by resident members in the delivery of direct services, particularly when their personal experiences closely correspond or identify with the problems that their work aims to address. In the words of Kim Nygard from the Tacoma PHA, which no longer recruits residents to serve as members, “it’s difficult to have people with high needs to serve people with high needs.” Melinda Point from the Oklahoma Community Service Commission described how the Tulsa Housing Authority (THA) is now shifting recruitment efforts away from resident and more

towards students and other community members, due to the PHA finding that “one resident teaching another resident various life skills didn’t really work.”

Most of the PHAs with positive experiences with residents serving as members receive primarily VISTA funding, which suggests that the program’s focus on capacity building and community organizing facilitates more constructive roles for resident members. As VISTAs, residents help build the capacities of resident councils and help community members to address common concerns. Resident VISTAs help to build awareness regarding the types of supportive services available, as well as organize and find funding for new programs. Mercer County Housing Authority, which has residents participating in a State-funded project, also had primarily positive feedback regarding such an approach. As discussed in Section 3.1.1, the housing authority partners with intermediary AmeriCorps organization, Keystone Smiles, which focuses in large part on construction projects rather than supportive services.

A few interviewees mentioned the strong advantages of having college students and educated older adults serve as AmeriCorps members rather than residents, one of which was a shorter learning curve and therefore less time spent in training. As one administrator noted, “better educated members already have the skills that are needed to get things done, as far as computers, literacy, work experience, etc.” However, other PHAs emphasized that all a member truly needs is a desire to serve and work hard for the community. In the words of Catherine Smith of Burlington Housing Authority, “Never discount your own community... our expectation is that everyone can serve. Even if [a member] can’t type, [he or she] knows how to do other tasks. Find out what those skills are and tap into those.”

4. Project Implementation

4.1 Administrative Requirements

As noted by Kim Nygard of King County Housing Authority, it is commonly recognized among AmeriCorps sponsors that before a member finishes their service, the member’s file will contain at least 125 pieces of paper. In other words, the reporting and administrative requirements of sponsoring an AmeriCorps member are a lot of work. Most PHAs and grant administrators interviewed have emphasized that a fulltime manager is required to properly run a medium to large AmeriCorps project of at least eight to ten members.

Long hours are required to just bring on new members and carry out background checks, particularly with resident members that at times do not have social security cards or birth certificates. Year-round tasks include project development, recruitment, ongoing training, counseling, peer support activities, community outreach, marketing, resource development, networking and maintaining working relationships with partners, recordkeeping and reporting. A number of supervisors emphasized the need to regularly maintain and keep up with all required paperwork, particularly timesheets and reports, because such requirements are impossible to complete last minute.

The administrative processes are somewhat different for AmeriCorps State and VISTA grantees. The reporting requirements of State projects depend on the rules of each State, but overall tend to be less rigorous than VISTA requirements. AmeriCorps VISTA grantees are asked to report on the goals and achievements of each member.

4.2 Support for Members

As noted in Section 3.2, CNCS and State Commissions regard retention rates as among the most important indicators of a well-managed AmeriCorps project. Ensuring a positive experience for each member and thereby sustaining members’ commitment levels are critical both for the overall impact of

the project, as well as for an increased likelihood of continued funding in the future.

A number of interviewees stressed that in many ways, ensuring the success of an AmeriCorps member's experience begins on day one by making sure that members have a keen sense of purpose, understanding of their work, and a feeling that they are appreciated. In the words of Evelyn LaRue from Minneapolis, "how they end depends on how they start... it is important to give a good overview of expectations up front." Pat Porter from King County emphasized that "acknowledging their contributions and providing meaningful service opportunities are critical for making sure that members have a successful service year." For JoAnn Ellers of Reno, it was important to demonstrate from the beginning that "I expected just as much from my VISTAs as I did from my staff... that VISTAs were very much a part of the team."

Also discussed by AmeriCorps managers was the value of PHA staff having a full understanding of AmeriCorps and thereby being able to provide support and encouragement to AmeriCorps members during their experience. The intermediary organization from which Kingsport receives funding, Tennessee Community Assistance Corporation (TCAC), provides trainings for site supervisors and other staff at the same time that AmeriCorps members receive pre-service orientation.

Providing a thorough orientation for AmeriCorps members lays a solid foundation from which members can get off to a good start and immediately begin working creatively. The majority of the PHAs have around two weeks of orientation for their AmeriCorps members, one that gives a general overview (for VISTAs, this takes place at a regional training) and one that is specific to the individual project and responsibilities. The Tacoma Housing Authority also carries out a community orientation, due to their members coming mostly from out of state. The members learn about how to use the bus system, access community resources, and apply for food stamps.

PHAs also carry out or look for training opportunities for members throughout the year, such as workshops on diversity, health and wellness, time management, grant writing, computer skills, etc. TCAC has developed a specialized curriculum of trainings that they provide not only for AmeriCorps members, but also for PHA staff throughout the region. TCAC trainings cover topics such as managing and dealing with difficult people, identifying community needs and setting goals, how to develop and manage a project, volunteer mobilization and management, and community mapping. Particularly for VISTA members, such trainings have proven to be very helpful.

Most AmeriCorps project managers hold weekly or bi-weekly group meetings to discuss members' current activities and challenges faced, provide time for members to organize group projects, or work together on an off-site service project. Regular meetings enable managers to prevent problems from arising or to address them immediately. The group meetings also facilitate opportunities for AmeriCorps members to support and learn from each other. As described by Michelle Padron, an AmeriCorps member for the Tulsa Housing Authority, "Team meetings are awesome, we have really bonded in those meetings... We encourage each other, and if we have a problem, someone across the room had a similar problem and offers a solution.... Everyone has the same goals. We all want to strengthen our community, ourselves and each other."

Regarding services and benefits, all PHAs provide members with stipends, health insurance, student-loan forbearance and child care for those that qualify. A number of members interviewed mentioned that receiving assistance in paying for transportation costs also would be very helpful. Tacoma is the only housing authority that also provides housing assistance for members, considered as an in-kind match by the Washington State Service Corps. THA's members are offered community-style housing in townhomes at one of the housing authority's HOPE VI sites, which, with both rent and utilities covered, effectively doubles members' stipends. AmeriCorps project manager, Kim Nygard, noted that mentioning the extra support on position descriptions proved to be a huge draw for online applicants.

A final way that PHAs and intermediary organizations report providing support to members is through

career counseling and preparation for life after AmeriCorps. The purpose of such guidance, particularly for residents, is to ensure that members fully capitalize on their experience through future employment. For example, the Minneapolis Housing Authority meets with members to discuss life after AmeriCorps and assist members in writing resumes, job searching, as well as developing a career plan. Both the Minneapolis and Kingsport housing authorities maintain relationships with potential employers in the area that respect the housing authorities' AmeriCorps projects and have offered jobs to former members. In addition, True North, the intermediary organization that funds the Duluth Housing Authority's AmeriCorps project, organizes trainings and retreats for members at a YMCA camp in Northern Minnesota. During a retreat near the end of members' terms of service, True North facilitates personal reflection sessions for groups of members, as well as provides guidance on resume writing, finding jobs and interviewing.

4.3 Activities

Members carry out a wide range of activities, as can be noted in Table 1 on page 5. Activities range from helping residents file their taxes, to coordinating a PHA's resource room that provides information on housing options, to teaching art classes for the youth and seniors of housing developments. When applying for a grant and identifying activities for implementation, PHAs must take into consideration four factors: 1) the requirements of the grant program to which they are applying, 2) the types of members they expect to be able to recruit, 3) the needs of the communities they serve, and 4) the capacity of their organization to effectively oversee the activities' implementation. The most successful projects seem to satisfy and find a balance between the four factors.

One AmeriCorps project in this study that finds this balance is the project run by the Kingsport Housing and Redevelopment Authority (KHRA), which partners with an intermediary organization, the Tennessee Community Action Corporation (TCAC), in sponsoring both AmeriCorps VISTA and AmeriCorps State members. Working through TCAC is an effective approach for KHRA and other small and medium-sized PHAs in rural Tennessee, for the PHAs may have limited capacities to otherwise manage a full AmeriCorps grant. TCAC supports the PHAs in meeting reporting and other administrative requirements, as well as in recruiting, training, and supervising members. KHRA and other PHAs identified the need to bring on both VISTAs to help build the capacities of resident councils, as well as State members that are able to provide direct service. The State members work in the Community Cares project, which involves assisting elderly and disabled residents with grocery shopping, light housekeeping, cognitive skills development, and in-home social activities.

In the case of another AmeriCorps project studied, for the activities of one specific position, the PHA initially did not ensure that the needs of the community corresponded with the skills of the member. During an interview, the member described how the first activities assigned to him did not seem to correspond with those in his position description, nor did the activities seem to be of value to the community. He described how in the few months of the member's year of service, he effectively served as a "babysitter" for youth in a computer lab, rather than as an "asset-building assistant" for adults, as was originally intended for his position. The member did not feel that he was assisting the community and using his skills in a constructive way during these first few months. Later, however, he began assuming more responsibilities that corresponded with his position description.

Another challenge faced by two PHAs in meeting the balance between the four factors has resulted in the PHAs not receiving AmeriCorps funding for the coming year. Both the Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority (CMHA) and Tacoma Housing Authority (THA) have not effectively met the activity requirements and guidelines of the grant programs to which they applied. CMHA has received VISTA funding for over fifteen years for their Home Instruction for Parents of Preschool Youth (HIPPY) project, which involves trained women residents visiting the homes of other housing development families to help parents prepare their toddler children for success in school. The Ohio CNCS office determined, after some efforts to help CMHA restructure their project, to discontinue funding the project due to the

members' activities basically consisting of direct service and therefore not meeting the requirements of the VISTA program. THA's arrangement involved members providing assistance to the housing authority's non-profit service providers. The Washington State Service Corps (WSSC) decided not to fund the project in the coming year due to the project's lack of a clear focus, as well as the THA essentially serving as an intermediary organization under WSSC, itself also being an intermediary organization.

4.4 Measuring and Achieving Success

Discussions on the success of an AmeriCorps project should take into account the degree to which the project has a positive impact on the community, the members themselves, as well as the sponsoring organization. Both quantitative and qualitative evaluations would be required to have a thorough understanding of a project's success on all three levels. Discussed below are three approaches for measuring project performance: retention rates, fulfillment of sustainability goals, and the extent to which AmeriCorps influences members' future employment and continued service to their communities.

As discussed in previous sections, one indicator of success emphasized by CNCS is the member retention rate, which when analyzed, reveals key insights into the cost-effectiveness of a given project. An incomplete AmeriCorps year results in a net loss of time and money dedicated to member recruitment, training, and ongoing support, efforts that could have been spent on another member or completely different project. Furthermore, a high number of members leaving the project early suggests poor management of recruitment processes and the general implementation of the project.

Most PHAs interviewed reported a retention rate of at least ninety percent. The only PHA that mentioned any problems in retaining members was Tulsa, whose retention rate fluctuates as much as fifty percent from year to year. As noted by Melinda Point of the Oklahoma State Service Commission, organizations such as the Tulsa Housing Authority may face local economic conditions and other influences on retention rates that are unlike those in other parts of the country. Tulsa also brings on the highest number of members out of the ten interviewed PHAs with AmeriCorps State and VISTA projects, and therefore they find it difficult to recruit enough of the right types of members that will not leave for higher-paid jobs. In general, as emphasized by Mark Gage from the Tennessee CNCS Office, organizations should not obsess about their retention rates to the extent that it prevents them from letting go members that cause serious problems for the organization and fellow members. In Gage's words, "weed out the bad apples really quick, because those ones will take up your time and cause problems."

A second indicator of success is the extent to which goals for a project's sustainability have been met. The VISTA program places a stronger emphasis on project sustainability through its focus on short-term projects that help communities find new, self-sustaining ways for alleviating poverty. However, neither AmeriCorps State nor VISTA are meant to be long-term sources of funding, and all sponsors should encourage members to assist in developing long-term strategies for the financing and staffing of activities. Therefore, sponsoring PHAs can measure success based upon the extent to which a project's pre-established timeline is followed and the project's activities continue to be implemented after the PHA's sponsorship of AmeriCorps members has ended.

An example of a successful project in this regard is the VISTA project of the Reno Housing Authority (RHA). Reno's project lasted from 1996 to 2002, with a total of around twenty-five residents serving as members. The most notable activity carried out by members involved establishing the funding, staffing, and programming for RHA's Family Self-Sufficiency program. Other activities involved helping resident councils to develop fundraising strategies, establishing a junior skiing/snowboarding program through the help of a local resort, and applying for grants from local foundations for a summer ranch camp for child residents. Although the RHA no longer sponsors VISTAs, all of the activities implemented by previous members still exist today.

A final indicator of success, particularly important for public housing authorities, is the extent to which AmeriCorps projects prepare members to enter the workforce and continue serving the needs of disadvantaged communities. Although AmeriCorps projects are not meant to be substitutes for job training programs, preparing members for employment is an important byproduct of AmeriCorps programs. As discussed in Section 4.2, a number of PHAs provide career counseling and job search assistance to members. Furthermore, AmeriCorps service often gives members an advantage over other job-seekers, as noted by Sidney Campbell from the Minnesota CNCS office: “A lot of employers look very favorably on people that have worked as VISTAs. Particularly in the public and non-profit sectors, as the VISTAs have gained experience working for a service organization. [Members will] get a job that others won’t get without VISTA experience.”

AmeriCorps serves as a stepping stone for many members. Those that are young and just out of college are able to get experience in professional fields that interest them. For residents, serving as a member helps them get accustomed to workplace routines, expectations and etiquette. AmeriCorps indirectly offers rent-based work incentives for member residents, similar to resident self-sufficiency programs, as the stipends members receive are not considered income and therefore do not increase the residents’ rent payments. The education awards encourage residents to sit down and reassess where they are headed in life and how they want to spend the money. Particularly for residents, such support is critical for ensuring that members capitalize on the skills and work experience they have gained during their AmeriCorps experience. Of the PHAs with residents serving as members, six out of eight report that the majority of these members have attended school and/or found jobs after finishing their service. All of the eight PHAs were not able to state the exact number of member residents that found jobs and continue to be employed.

CNCS regularly measures the impact of the agency’s service programs, in particular the degree to which AmeriCorps members are engaged in their communities and continue working in service careers upon completing their term of service. Through an eight-year longitudinal study measuring the impact of AmeriCorps on alumni, CNCS has found that AmeriCorps has a significant impact on the lives of members and their motivation to continue serving their communities. As noted in a CNCS issue brief, former members are more likely than a comparative group to enter into public service careers, and they “feel more empowered to work for the betterment of their community.”⁶

Interviews for this study revealed similar positive impacts that AmeriCorps service has had on current members. The following quotes demonstrate that through their AmeriCorps experiences, members have gained confidence, broadened their understanding of diverse groups and perspectives, and strengthened their commitment and skills for working in the public sector.

“Edna and Judy Douglas have been a huge influence on my life. I didn’t think that I could do this, but they said don’t give up.... I’ve learned to overcome some of my shyness. I used to always get somebody’s approval, now I don’t need to.... I would like to continue doing what I’m doing now.”

“I’ve learned that everybody can serve, and national service is not just for upper class white folks.”

“I’ve gained knowledge of how the school system works in low-income areas, how kids view their education and opportunities. I’ve learned how to get people communicating with their kids and their school.”

“I always come away feeling that I’ve gained so much more knowledge and use it in my own day to day life.... Professionally I have gained skills I didn’t have before. I’ve learned how to deal and work with immigrants and different cultures.... I’ve grown and become a better person.”

“What I didn’t know is how it was going to benefit me so much.... When I joined AmeriCorps, I was

⁶ “AmeriCorps Longitudinal Study: Impact of Service after 8 Years,” Corporation for National and Community Service, Issue Brief, May 2008. http://www.nationalservice.gov/pdf/08_0513_longstudy_factsheet.pdf

going through a divorce. The project helped me to keep my mind off my own problems by helping others.... I've gained self assurance, prepared for the next challenge, not shying away from it.... I'm ready to take everything I've learned to start my own company, providing art and art therapy for underserved youth."

5. Conclusions

For the eleven PHAs included in this study, it is clear that collaboration with AmeriCorps has been extremely beneficial for housing authority programs, residents, and communities served. Based upon the knowledge gained through the interviews, HUD proposes the following recommendations for the development and improvement of PHA AmeriCorps projects.

1. **Who benefits the most?** AmeriCorps projects are beneficial for everyone involved, directly or indirectly, but especially for members and sponsoring organizations. For residents, serving as an AmeriCorps member can be a life-changing experience, providing them with the skills and confidence to become self-sufficient and gainfully employed. Both residents and non-residents serving as members can provide invaluable support and creativity for a PHA's project. However, non-residents may have a much shorter learning curve, be able to provide more technical expertise, and take less time to supervise and support during their term of service. Therefore, when considering becoming an AmeriCorps sponsor, PHAs should look at many different approaches, weighing both the challenges and benefits to all involved, particularly for approaches with residents serving as members.
2. **Maintaining or expanding?** When considering the two programs covered in this study, AmeriCorps State and AmeriCorps VISTA, PHAs should decide whether they need support for their existing projects or wish to build in scope and explore new possibilities. The purpose of VISTA is to build the capacities of organizations in order to better address problems in low-income communities. AmeriCorps State grants, on the other hand, allow PHAs to obtain assistance in their current efforts to serve communities (although capacity-building is also encouraged). VISTA grants may be a better option for PHAs wanting to bring on residents as members, for non-resident members have been found to more effectively provide direct services to existing residents, particularly adults. All of these factors and questions should be considered by PHAs before deciding to apply for an AmeriCorps VISTA or AmeriCorps State grant.
3. **A support structure to enable success.** For those PHAs that decide to bring on residents as members, a comprehensive strategy should be developed regarding the recruitment and selection of residents, as well as the training and support needed along the way. Residents prepared to serve their community and use their AmeriCorps experience as a stepping stone should be identified and encouraged to participate. Appropriate initial training should be provided to give them confidence and a foundation of knowledge upon which to carry out activities. Opportunities to build upon existing skills and reliable supervision and support should be provided continuously. Finally, residents should receive career counseling and assistance in finding post-AmeriCorps employment at the end of their term of service.
4. **The importance of project managers.** Discussions with PHAs and grant administrators revealed the degree to which a good project manager can make or break a project. If a PHA decides to sponsor a medium to large project (more than eight to ten members), a full-time AmeriCorps manager should be hired that values and understands the benefits of community service.
5. **Intermediaries as an alternative.** For smaller PHAs that are concerned about having the time to manage an AmeriCorps project, becoming a subgrantee of an intermediary organization should be

considered. Intermediary organizations work directly with CNCS and State Commissions, and they can provide support to PHAs for meeting reporting and other administrative requirements, as well as recruiting, training, and supervising members. The Tennessee Community Assistance Corporation provides a unique model for an intermediary organization, as it serves and specializes in facilitating AmeriCorps projects for sixteen PHAs in Tennessee.

Appendix A: List of Interviewees

Housing Authority	PHA	Member	Grant Administrator
Burlington Housing Authority	Catherine Smith	Wanda Evans	<i>CNCS North Carolina</i> Betty Platt
Cuyahoga Metropolitan Housing Authority	Ernest Stewart Trisha Fomby		<i>CNCS Ohio</i> Tina Dunphy
Duluth Housing Authority	Susan Jordan		<i>True North AmeriCorps Program</i> Blair Gagne
King County Housing Authority	Pat Porter Linda Weedman	Emily Ausema	
Kingsport Housing Authority	Edna Potts	Sandra Bly	<i>CNCS Tennessee</i> Mark Gage
			<i>Tennessee Community Assistance Corporation</i> Jawanna Chapman, Judy Deavours, Angela Davis
Mercer County Housing Authority	L. DeWitt Boosel		
Milwaukee Housing Authority			<i>Milwaukee Community Service Corps</i> Chris Litzau
Minneapolis Housing Authority	Evelyn LaRue	Patricia Fields	<i>CNCS Minnesota</i> Sidney Campbell
Reno Housing Authority	JoAnn Ellers		
Tacoma Housing Authority	Kim Nygard	Brian Smith	<i>Washington State Service Corps</i> Sheryl Baker
Tulsa Housing Authority	Lisa Patchen Leslie Gross	Michelle Padron	<i>Oklahoma Community Service Commission</i> Melinda Points